

Washington, DC -- Congresswoman Linda Sánchez (D-CA) introduced bipartisan legislation today that would criminalize cyberbullying by giving prosecutors the ability to punish those who use the internet, or other electronic means, to coerce, intimidate, harass or cause other substantial emotional distress. Congressman Kenny Hulshof (R-MO) is the lead Republican co-sponsor of the bill.

Cyberbullying has made national headlines in recent months following the suicide of St. Louis teenager Megan Meier. Meier made friends with a young man named Josh online. Their friendship soon deteriorated with Josh telling Megan “the world would be better off without you.” Following Megan’s suicide, investigations revealed “Josh” to be an alias created by the mother of one of Megan’s former friends.

“Without a federal law making cyberbullying a crime, cyberbullies are going unpunished,” Congresswoman Linda Sánchez said. “In the Meier case we saw an adult allegedly engaging in sick, demented behavior with tragic consequences. This bill sends a clear message to anyone who commits cyberbullying: online actions will have severe offline consequences.”

At the time of Megan’s death, cyberbullying was not considered a crime. The adult responsible for the hoax went unpunished. Recently, federal charges were filed under criminal statutes dealing with wire fraud, but federal law fails to specifically address cyberbullying.

“This bill establishes a fair legal standard,” Congressman Hulshof said. “It sets needed limits for online conduct while protecting free speech. Megan Meier’s story is tragic and heart-breaking. It is my hope that this case can yield common sense reforms that help prevent something like this from ever happening again.”

“Bullying is poisonous to a child’s mental and physical health,” Congresswoman Linda Sánchez said. “We need to give prosecutors the ability to protect kids by punishing people who abuse the internet to bully.

Congresswoman Sánchez represents California’s 39th district. Since her election to Congress she has developed, and helped pass, legislation protecting children online, including a bill providing for investments in internet safety education programs. She is the sponsor of H.R. 3132, the Safe Schools Improvement Act, and H.R. 3438, the Bullying and Gang Reduction for Improved Education Act. Both bills would ensure that schools could use existing federal funding to address school-based bullying and harassment, whether in person or online.